



Svaroopaa® Vidya Ashram

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Self & Self #7

Freedom

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Having grown up in America, freedom was an ideal that inspired me. As a kindergartener, I made pilgrim hats out of black construction paper, representing the Pilgrims who were seeking religious freedom. I was heartened by the preamble to the Constitution which I learned in third grade. It cites goals of union, justice, liberty and peace. Thus I was ready when I found yoga and learned that the goal is freedom. I felt an immediate resonance with it.

I didn't understand what freedom was. As a teenager, I wanted a superficial freedom: an escape from my parents (seemingly) unreasonable demands and expectations. Once I started managing my own life, I wanted freedom to do what I wanted, as well as the freedom to do nothing at all if I chose. None of these are the freedom that yoga promises.

As important as freedom and social justice are, neither of these is yoga's focus. Individual yogis may choose to focus there, as did Mahatma Gandhi in India 100 years ago. He successfully used yogic ideals as a launching pad for political goals. His work also inspired Rev. Martin Luther King in his world-changing mission.

Yogic freedom is an inner experience, not something you project into the world or ask of it. It is also called liberation. Consider this: if the goal is liberation, it means you are currently in bondage. Your bondage is internal. It's about who you think you are compared to who you really are. These two fundamental principles of yoga are clearly summarized in the primary text of Kashmiri Shaivism.

Chaitanyam-aatmaa Consciousness-Itself is your own Self.

J~naanam bandha.h The not-knowing (of your Self) is bondage.

— Shiva Sutras 1.1-2

These sutras define the mystical quest. Sutra 1 divulges the secret of your inherent Divinity. Sutra 2 explains that you don't know your inherent Divinity. It's a conundrum. It's the cosmic game of hide and seek: you are hiding while you are also the one seeking your own Self. Like a dog chasing its tail, you go round and round for lifetimes.

This text guides you through a process that begins with Shaktipat, the initiation that activates the arising of Consciousness within you. After that, how long it takes for you to get enlightened is up to you. Your own blossoming forth is assured, just like daffodils that will bloom in the spring, but you don't know when spring will come. The text gives you ways to push it along.

There are three different ways to help yourself. These are systematic processes that move you through stages of inner expansion. They are called "upaya," meaning a means, an approach, a remedy or path. Which of the three you use depends on your starting point. If you are in California, you can go surfing for an hour or two, but if you are in Nebraska, that doesn't work. So you use the process that is relevant to your starting point.

Simply stated, when you are feeling balanced and peaceful, you can consciously tip the balance so that you land deeper inside. You land in your own Self. This is called Shambhavopaya, a way to cultivate your experience of your own Shiva-ness, your Divine Essence. It's a knowing, not a thought.

When you're thinking, you are using your mind. Thus you're not always balanced and peaceful. When you're caught up in your mind, you need Shaktopaya. This is the process of using your mind to get beyond your mind. Mantra gives makes you able to harness the power of your mind to carry you all the way to your own Self.

Unfortunately, sometimes you're even worse off. You can get so lost in things that you don't know where you are, who you are, and why you are... You just don't know. Now is when you use Anavopaya, starting with body and breath, steadily weaving yourself back into a whole again. That wholeness becomes a profound feeling of holiness, the sanctity of your own Self. This is yogic freedom.

I'll use a metaphor. You're a baby bird who is learning to fly. You've got the right equipment (wings), but you don't know how to use them. You stand on the edge of the nest, stretch your wings out and even get a sense that you could soar into space, but then your feet get tangled in the nest fibers. Tumbling down to the ground, you're in danger of being found by a predator, so it's more urgent that you get your wings figured out.

Let's look at the metaphor with some Sanskrit added in. When you're on the edge of the nest with your wings spread, all you need is a little tilt in the right direction. Then you can fly. What is that little tilt? You cultivate (upaya) the feeling (bhav) of being Shiva (Shambho). This is Shambhavopaya. I like to describe it as "backing into your Self," or you can make it work by remembering your experience in meditation. This is not a thought process. It is a matter of will. You grok it.

In the nest metaphor, when your feet get entangled in the nest fibers, you're getting entangled in your mind. "Yes/No. Good/Bad. He said/She said." Even if you flap your wings, you're going nowhere. Shaktopaya is your path to freedom. You use your mind, which is made of the power of Consciousness (Shakti), and you carve a pathway (upaya) to Self. Mantra repetition gets you untangled so you can launch into flight.

But if you've fallen to the ground, you've got a bigger challenge. You don't have a launching pad. You're disoriented and confused. So you begin with your body, using breath and movement. It's called yoga. This is the path of individuality. You work with your limited sense of individuality (anava) to discover the path (upaya) to freedom. Most practices fit into the Anavopaya category, including study of yogic principles, donations, chanting and seva. Since you have a distinct sense of small-s self, you work with what you've got. And then your wings begin to work and you attain lift-off.

In every satsang, I give you all three upayas. I learned it from my Baba. He'd lead us in a chant, which began the reweaving process we needed, making us whole again. Continuing with Anavopaya, he'd give teachings, so we could begin to understand the wholeness we were experiencing. Next he'd lead us in mantra, pure Shaktopaya. Finally he'd talk us into meditation, saying, "Meditate on your own Self." His words, even just the sound of his voice, would propel me right in, deep and easy. Tilt!

You can do this for yourself in your own meditation. Start with some chanting, or do some yogic breathing or poses – even 5 or 10 minutes makes a difference. Then repeat the mantra¹. I recommend starting it aloud because it focuses your attention. Then shift the mantra inside and keep it going. Because we work with an enlivened mantra, it pulls you deep within. Tilt!

Each time you tilt inward, you experience the deeper dimensions of your own being. You are discovering more of the wholeness of your own Self. This experience fills you so full that you don't get entangled in your mind like you used to. This means, even when you are not meditating, you are becoming free. You lose your knee-jerk reflexes, gaining freedom from the emotional patterns that used to hold you back.

In worldly situations, your feelings and thoughts matter. But spiritual development gives you the deeper dimensions within. Discovering the light and bliss of your own Being makes you free from the old patterns. The new patterns that emerge are Divine emotions. They fill your heart and mind, so your first impulse is compassion and understanding toward others. You even treat yourself differently.

In the midst of life, you shine with the light of the Consciousness that you are. You join in the give and take of life, but you are so full inside, you've got a lot to give. Now you can truly serve the world. This is why you need to do more yoga.

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¹ To get the mantra for yourself, order a Mantra Card at svaroopā.org/mantra-card